REV. JOHN TALBOT SMITH, LL.D.

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WHEN the members of the graduating class, editing the St. Michael's College "Year Book" for 1916, dedicated to Very Rev. John Talbot Smith their fine and ably written Yearly, they intended to confer, and did confer an exceptional compliment on a past alumnus of the College, and now one of the most distinguished men in the ranks of the American priesthood.

The name of John Talbot Smith is so familiar to us as an author, journalist, Catholic playwright, lecturer, dramatic critic and all round literary athlete that to attempt an exhaustive review of the man and his achievements is, to use a hackneyism, like painting the lily or gilding refined gold.

Father Smith is a fascinating writer, and one of the outstanding figures in the American Church to-day. His literary activities are amazing and are always confined within sane and conservative lines. His versatility is phenomenal, and his range of vision altogether exceptional. In fact, he is so many-sided that it is not easy to classify him, and we are satisfied that if he had concentrated his mentality and marvellous energy on some one department of literature, he would have achieved a more enduring, if not a greater, reputation. His mellow, fluent and gentlemanly style is saturated with the sounds, scents and colours of a southern landscape, and the exercise of his cultivated judgment is with him a sacred trust which he holds for his Catholic beneficiaries.

He has the faculty of keeping abreast with orthodox contemporary thought, of cultivating and retaining a flexibility of intellect that prevents him ever becoming a mere imitator of popular writers.

Father Smith is, as a warm admirer of his writings said to us not long ago: "A red hot propagandist of the faith; impatient with his own for their want of energy and enraged with the enemy for their dishonesty. He writes, as a soldier fights, for the good of the cause and, occasionally, because consumed by fire he must write."

He has now rounded out his three score years of an honourable life and is a man of whom the New York Sun said: "He is delivering a message which might well rouse his day and generation."

Father Smith has been charged by some querulous critics with subordinating Catholic dialectics to the trivialities of the popular novel. But what is a Catholic priest gifted with lofty thoughts to do? If he publishes a book freighted with Catholic argument and controversial or philosophic thought, the people will not read it.

The reading public, to-day, inside or outside the Church, is not clamouring for ponderous writing, no matter how sound or cogent it may be, and while the learned writer has not passed out of vogue, he must to-day make no parade of his learning. "Have you read Cardinal Wiseman's Essays and Lectures?" asked the elder Ward of Lady Portarlington. "No, I have not," she answered, "but I read his Fabiola twice over."

The Duke of Argyle, in a brief reminiscence of Tennyson, tells us the poet once said to him in referring to Lady Tennyson: "She is a sweet, spiritual woman who delights in brilliancy and crispness, avoiding heavy reading as she does heavy dinners."

And so Father Talbot is trying to-day to do what Cardinals Wiseman and Newman did for their generations when, for the masses, they recast Catholic truth, Catholic heroism and Catholic morals in popular molds like Fabiola and Calista.

It is impossible to read Father Smith's various publications and not be impressed with his Catholic trend of thought. And because of his sound Catholic principles he is always well bal-

anced and what he writes always rings true. There is in his books a wealth of timely information seasoned with the wisdom of one who knows men; whose knowledge of American institutions and American ways is wide and profound, and who gives his readers the benefit of his experience and illumination with mingled wit and kindness and tolerance of human frailty. Because of his experience and knowledge he will never be swept off his feet by false philosophy or by hysterical agitation.

Long ago Owen Meredith urged that if the novel was to serve a good purpose it must give us "brainstuff" and "foodstuff" and must appeal to: "The inner noiseless heaven of the soul." [illegible] not all, of Father Smith's novels measure up to Mered[illegible] dard, particularly his "Woman of Culture" and h[illegible]ook, the "Black Cardinal." Nowhere has the author [illegible] so complete a grasp of his art or written with a more fervent human appeal than in his "Woman of Culture." Here he is very much at home, and has free play in depicting a condition with which he is quite familiar. The drama is staged in Canada, where the author portrays the social and domestic life of the people with fluency and ease. His heroine is a disciple of the neo-culture of our times and because she lives in an atmosphere of refinement and art, she deems herself superior to temptation. But when put to the test and confronted with a choice between duty and submission, her culture did not save her from the abyss.

Belonging to that decadent set of women who aspire to be leaders and liberators of their sex and, who in the cities of the United States are to-day so conspicuous for their advocacy of equality of the sexes, the woman of culture attached little importance to the old exhortation, "Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever." She reversed the sage advice, and, accepting as her rule of life, "Be clever and let who will be good," ended disastrously.

In the three hundred and fifty-three pages of this fascinating book there is [illegible]othing which were better omitted. The author has attempted and succeeded in describing human emotions and human feelings as only a close student of person-

alities can describe them, and with a diction almost unfailingly good. Nothing but the Parisian, or—in this case—Phoenician realism of the 20th century can account for the perverted taste which induces people to prefer the salacious novel of a morbid woman to a clean, wholesome and uplifting book like this.

One cannot help noticing that in all his writings the author's aim has always been to portray to Catholics and their non-Catholic neighbours the unalterable attachment of the Church to all that makes for the permanency of Christian morals and Christian doctrine. This is particularly so in his latest book, the "Black Cardinal," a story dealing with the divorce of Bonaparte from his lawful wife Josephine, and the compulsory separation of Prince Jerome Bonaparte from his wife Elizabeth Patterson, whom the Prince married in Baltimore. Opposed to the autocratic power of the French Emperor is the infallible voice of the Roman Pontiff, Pius VII., represented by his Prime Minister, the inflexible Cardinal Consalvi. After fencing for an opening with the Cardinal, the Emperor enters a stubborn protest against the refusal of the Pope to endorse his marriage to Marie Louise of Austria or dissolve the bonds which united Jerome to Miss Patterson.

"Jerome," exclaims Bonaparte, "is a true son of the Church, yet the Pope will not free him from his marriage with a Protestant savage in Baltimore."

"It is out of his power," spoke back Consalvi, "if a marriage be valid, there is no power on earth, within or without the Church, capable of dissolving it."

Every chapter of this fascinating novel bristles with defensive arguments protecting the integrity and indissolubility of lawful marriage. Aside from the value and interest of its historical and biographical studies and its charm as a piece of delightful English, this book ought to have a wide and general perusal, if for no other reason than to enlighten many of its readers who may have forgotten, or may never have known the stern attitude of the Holy See on divorce.

While reading this stumlating book we feel as one who looks for the first time on a finely chiseled piece of statuary.

The style is that of a literary artist. It is a book that suggests the purity and freshness of the open air and we hope it has been appraised at its true worth by the reading public. But unfortunately in America, to-day good wholesome Catholic novels are limited in their popularity by racial, religious and temporal or (to use Emerson's words) "secular impediments."

This book should be helpful in awakening the American people to a true social consciousness of the proclamation of our Divine Lord: "What therefore God hath joined together let no man put asunder."

In his novels "Solitary Island," "Saranac," "His Honor the Mayor," and "The Man Who Vanished," there is no discordant note out of harmony with the highest Christian ideals.

But the stories themselves are highly individualised and differentiated from one another just as the characters who play the title roles are persons of distinct individuality in the fields of their various activities.

In all his books the aim of Father Smith is directed towards the targets of ignorance and bigotry. "I hate that man," Charles Lamb is reported to have said of a neighbour. "How can you hate him," exclaimed his companion, "when you do not even know him." "That is precisely the reason," answered Lamb. "If I knew him, I probably would not hate him." The same reason for dislik of the Catholic Church permeates much of the social and denominational life of the United States to-day, and it has become synthesized into heroic proportions by the dissemination of colossal lies wearing the mask of probability.

Against these misrepresentations of Catholic doctrine and personalities, Father Smith has, for thirty-five years, fought with consummate ability. His books are filled with sound, cogent arguments, and of course admirably written, to prove why these lies are lies.

Dr. Smith has also published a series of useful and instructive books for boys. His stories, "The Prairie Boy," "The Boy Who Looked Ahead," and "The Boy Who Came Back," are an invigorating tonic to the young minds surfeited with the

puerilities of our city life. In these books he has shown how tales for boys ripen into food for adults when virility and intellect unite in the making of them. The stories take an ingratiating and delightful hold on the youthful imagination and affection. The tales fill a broad canvas and are inspired by a deep concern and love for boys; they portray with an originality that is both refreshing and invigorating the nature, hopes and aspirations of young hearts soon to enter the domain of early manhood.

"It will be a surprise to Catholics to learn," writes Dr. Smith in Extension Magazine (June, 1916), "that half the profession (theatrical) is made up of members of the Church, and that Catholic actresses are as numerous as Catholic actors. . . . But the innumerable Catholic women connected with it are in the mass as religious and moral as any other group of working women in the country." It, indeed, is a surprise to learn that one half the profession is Catholic, and more than a surprise when we are told that of a population of one hundred millions in the United States, Catholics are but as one to seven. However, Father Smith speaks with authority gained from practical study and experience extending over a period of many years. He knows what he is talking about, and because he does know is the reason he has always as a moralist taken a deep interest in the "stage" and all that it stands for.

Back in 1907, in the February number of Donahoe's Magazine, Father Smith in an article with the overwritten title: "A Chance for the Religious Drama," says: "The average American is utterly unaware of the divorce evil, its frightful extent and deep ravages; and Protestant religious leaders seem afraid to touch it lest the vengeance of the smart set strike at their salaries."

To familiarize the public with the nobility of Catholic thought and practice and to portray the ravages of divorce in their hideous consequences, Father Smith wrote two or three remarkable plays, which, while they had occasional production on the stage, remain as "closet" dramas. In these plays of the versatile composer, which we were privileged to read, there

is much of the fine exactness, the thrust of phrases, the style of diction and the sedateness which we associate with the Greek drama. They are the productions of a man many-sided in his nature and show an elasticity of mind and versatility of talent altogether out of the ordinary.

There is this to be said about the plays and books of Father Smith, they are marked by an essentially masculine note. In all his works there is no note of that cynicism which George Meredith characterized as "intellectual dandyism." It is amazing that, considering his parochial duties and calls upon his time, he has been able to accomplish so much with comprehensiveness and exactitude in the time at his disposal. His literary activities have been altogether out of the ordinary and the output of his pen shows marvellous scope and amazing industry.

Father Smith has always held positive convictions and has never been timid in expressing them. He has always stood for progress along Catholic lines. A staunch and insistent advocate of a higher education of the seminarian, accompanied by refinement of manners and graciousness of address, he has stood for all that makes for the priestly man and the manly priest. Goethe shrewdly remarks that a man's eye—whether physical or mental—sees just what it has the capacity to see. Father Smith saw some things in the training of our ecclesiastical students which could be improved or altered for the better, and he did not hesitate to avow his belief in opposition to the opinions of some who stood for the retention of century-old customs. But of more definite significance to the Catholic readers of his books is the fact that all through their illuminating pages there is a note of intense orthodoxy, attachment to the accredited devotions of our Church and sympathy for the poor and lowly, all of which is most stimulating reading.

The learned author in all his works has discussed situations, personalities and measures with engaging faultlessness and rare good temper, and, at times, has displayed keen penetration in his estimates. He has character, experience, ability and skill, and in his voluminous writings he has maintained an

excellence it is a pleasure to commend. The times and the land call aloud for more Talbot Smiths to lead aright their generations. The appeal and lines of the poet-philosopher are as insistent and pertinent to-day as when they were written:

"God give us men. The time demands
Strong minds, great hearts, true faith and willing hands:
Men whom the lust of preference does not kill:
Men whom the hopes of office will not buy;
Men who possess opinions and a will;
Men who have honour, men who will not lie.

THE VERY REV. W. R. HARRIS.